

## Learning to Live With Killers in the Neighborhood

By MICHAEL BEZDEK

I'm a dog guy pretty much, but my two favorite pets among the assortment our family has owned over the years in Duxbury have turned out to be cats, after all.

### COMMENTARY

But they were not your average cats. I called them both dog-cats because they had hybrid personalities; they came when you called them, joined you in the yard while you worked and were fast friends with two very large family dogs. One of them even helped himself to dog food at times. As it turned out, they were both killed by coyotes, part of the extended dog family *Canidae*.

Their names were Herman D., a fat, affable orange cat, and Mandu, a silky, sinewy black cat who was an offspring of a menagerie rescued from a cat woman who lived in a car.

After a coyote made off with Herman D. a couple of years ago, I vowed to be more stoical in the event of a similar incident and to fully understand that any lax supervision could be fatal. Recently I was able to keep my promise to myself (at least outwardly) when I came upon Mandu, who had been disemboweled at the edge of the driveway on the one night he did not answer our call to home. (Should have left the dog out.)

My first thoughts included recollections that a .223 Remington is a preferred round for taking out coyotes. But I was a kid when that was possible. Nowadays you can't discharge a firearm in almost any rural-suburban area in the nation. And trapping requires a special permit after you have established that the animal is a menace to public health or safety. Except for the three-year-old child that was bitten by a coyote in 1998 in Sandwich while on a swing set, there are no known incidents of them posing a direct threat to people in our area. There is a state hunting season from November through February, but only in very rural settings. And shootings or trappings have little impact on coyote populations anyway. Where extermination attempts have been undertaken, wildlife biologists have learned that coyotes respond by producing larger annual litters as compensation.

We must live with them. Lots of them. Forever. So, who are these guys?

They are immigrants from west of the Mississippi over the last 30 years, with a fair number probably working their way down from Maine.

The Eastern coyote is different from the Western type; they are about a third larger on average, and the males can reach up to 50 pounds or more. Some theorize that this is because the Eastern coyotes mixed with gray wolves, while others say it is simply

due to the fact that the Eastern habitat is so much richer in food sources.

Coyotes are primarily carnivores who feast on rodents, but they are really omnivores who will consume small pets, garbage, pet food, fruits, carrion, bark, vegetables and just about anything they can digest. Mark Twain described the coyote as "a living, breathing, allegory of Want. He is always hungry."

**My first thoughts included recollections that a .223 Remington is a preferred round for taking out coyotes. But I was a kid when that was possible. Nowadays you can't discharge a firearm in almost any rural-suburban area in the nation.**

Coyotes typically hunt at night, especially at dusk and dawn, sometimes as a family led by a male and female couple. But we see only solitary stalkers around Eagles Nest marsh, and more have been seen during the day in recent years, probably as they become more accustomed to people.

Coyotes are incredibly cunning and adaptable, and their legacy as legendary "tricksters" (their name comes from the Aztec word "coyotl") goes back hundreds of years in Indian lore. As an example of the coyote's willingness, wildlife biologists are beginning

to realize that suburban coyotes can get to know a family's comings and goings, and might come lurking around a house after the family has left for work and school.

These are formidable predators who kill to live. To paraphrase Cleveland Amory, most cats hunt in sport, coyotes hunt in earnest. A new reality in Duxbury is that when you see a poster someone has put up pleading for the return of a cat or a small dog, the odds are fair that a coyote has struck.

We can discourage their home visits by keeping garbage cans covered; by not feeding pets outside; by clearing fallen fruit, and by fencing off fruit trees. And don't try to befriend them, both because they might bite, as happened in Rhode Island, and because accommodating them breaks down their natural wariness of humans. In most suburban areas, coyotes are less afraid of people anyway because of their familiarity with the sights, sounds and scents of humans.

Finally, if you live on a marsh in Duxbury, or any other habitat known to house coyotes, you can't let a cat or small dog go out at night unattended. It will be killed eventually.

*Michael Bezdek was a longtime news executive with The Associated Press and lecturer at several colleges. The Duxbury resident now runs a public relations agency, getpress.com.*